What is Claimed is:

1.   A method for processing a plurality of undeliverable mail items comprising the steps of:

encoding data including an identification of an addressee on each of the plurality of mail items in a machine-readable form;

mailing the plurality of mail items from a subscriber to the addressees;

receiving at a processing location those items of the plurality of mail items that are returned as being undeliverable;

scanning the data stored on the received items of undeliverable mail and storing the data in an application server database;

updating the read data to reflect a correct current address of each intended recipient of the items of returned mail; and

delivering the updated data to the subscriber in electronic form for use in updating the address files of the subscriber.

2.   The method for processing a plurality of undeliverable mail items of claim 1 wherein the step of encoding data includes placing an optically encoded barcode in a return address section of each of the plurality of mail items.

3.   The method for processing a plurality of undeliverable mail items of claim 2 wherein the barcode is a two-dimensional barcode.

4.   The method for processing a plurality of undeliverable mail items of claim 3 wherein the two-dimensional barcode is a Portable Data File 417 (PDF417) barcode.

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5.   The method for processing a plurality of undeliverable mail items of claim 1 further comprising the step of loading the plurality of undeliverable mail items on a transport mechanism for sorting into a plurality of categories.

6.   The method for processing a plurality of undeliverable mail items of claim 5 wherein the plurality of categories includes a barcode not decoded category and a barcode decoded successfully category.

7.   The method for processing a plurality of undeliverable mail items of claim 1 wherein the step of scanning the data stored on the received undeliverable mail includes reading an optically encoded barcode on each item and decoding the barcode to determine a name and current address associated with an intended recipient of the item.

8.   The method for processing a plurality of undeliverable mail items of claim 7 further comprising the step of generating an output file from the scanned and decoded data in the optically encoded barcode.

9.   The method for processing a plurality of undeliverable mail items of claim 8 further comprising the step of transmitting the generated output file to a service bureau in order to obtain a correct address for each intended recipient of an undeliverable mail item.

10. A method for processing returned mail items sent by a subscriber to a recipient, the returned mail items incorporating machine-readable information including the identity of the intended recipient, the method comprising the steps of:

collecting the returned mail items at a processing location;

reading the machine-readable information from the returned mail items;

electronically gathering updated information including a correct address of the intended recipient; and

electronically transmitting updated information to the subscriber for updating of ~~a subscriber's address database~~.

11. The method for processing returned mail items of claim 10 wherein the machine readable information is placed in an optically encoded barcode in a return address section of each ~~of the plurality of mail items.~~

12. The method for processing returned mail items of claim 11 wherein the barcode is a two-dimensional barcode.

13. The method for processing returned mail items of claim 12 wherein the two-dimensional barcode is a Portable Data File 417 (PDF417) barcode.

14. The method for processing returned mail items of claim 10 further comprising the step of loading the plurality of undeliverable mail items on a transport mechanism for sorting ~~into a plurality of categories~~.

15. The method for processing returned mail items of claim 14 wherein the plurality of categories includes a barcode not decoded category and a barcode decoded successfully category.

16. The method for processing returned mail items of claim 10 wherein the step of reading the machine-readable information includes scanning an optically encoded barcode on each item and decoding the barcode to determine a name and current address associated with the intended recipient of the item.

17. The method for processing returned mail items of claim 16 further comprising the step of generating an output file from the scanned and decoded data in the optically encoded barcode.

18. The method for processing returned mail items of claim 17 further comprising the step of transmitting the generated output file to a service bureau in order to obtain a correct address for each intended recipient of an undeliverable mail item.

19. A computer readable medium containing a computer program product for processing a plurality of undeliverable mail items, the computer program product comprising:

    program instructions that capture optically scanned encoded data including an identification of the addressee on each item of undeliverable mail;

    program instructions that store the captured optically scanned data in a data file;

program instructions that update the encoded data to reflect a correct current address of the intended recipient of each item of undeliverable mail; and

program instructions that transmit the updated encoded data to a subscriber in electronic form to update the address files of the subscriber.

20. The computer program product for processing a plurality of undeliverable mail items of claim 19 wherein the encoded data is placed in an optically encoded barcode in a return address section of each mail item.

21. The computer program product for processing a plurality of undeliverable mail items of claim 20 wherein the bar code is a two-dimensional bar code.

22. The computer program product for processing a plurality of undeliverable mail items of claim 19 wherein the encoded data includes a name and current address associated with the intended recipient of the mail item.

23. The computer program product for processing a plurality of undeliverable mail items of claim 19 further comprising program instructions that transmit the stored data file electronically to a service bureau in order to obtain a correct address for each intended recipient of an undeliverable mail item.

24.   A system for processing a plurality of undeliverable mail items comprising:

a mail transport device for conveying the plurality of undeliverable items and sorting the undeliverable mail items into a plurality of bins;

a scanner for reading an optically encoded data field that includes an identification of the addressee on each item of undeliverable mail;

an application server for operation of a computer program product for capturing the scanned data and writing the scanned data into a data file; and

an undeliverable mail items database for storing the data file.

25.   The system for processing a plurality of undeliverable mail items of claim 24 wherein the program product includes instructions that update the stored scanned data in the data file with a correct current address associated with each of the undeliverable mail items.

26.   The system for processing a plurality of undeliverable mail items of claim 24 wherein the program product includes instructions that deliver the updated stored scanned data to a subscriber in electronic form for use in updating the address files of the subscriber.

27.   The system for processing a plurality of undeliverable mail items of claim 24 wherein the optically encoded data field contains a two-dimensional barcode.